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SUBJECT: NEW MEDIA, ETERNAL MESSAGE: THE HOLY SEE AND THE WEB

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¶1. (U) Summary: Pope Benedict XVI is now on YouTube. This new channel, the result of collaboration between the Vatican and Google, is the Holy See's latest foray into the world of new media. Concerns persist at the Holy See over the digital divide and web content, but the Vatican's commitment to new media seems destined to grow even as the message it disseminates is likely to remain more traditional. End summary.

¶2. (U) At a well-attended press conference on January 23, the Holy See unveiled a new YouTube channel (available at [HYPERLINK "http://www.youtube.com/vatican"](http://www.youtube.com/vatican)) which hosts material - such as the Pope's speeches and appearances - supplied by the Vatican Television Center and Vatican Radio. Additional videos produced by the semi-official H20 news agency will also be available. Currently, programming is offered in English, German, Italian, and Spanish, but not -- as participants pointed out at the press conference -- in French. There is no advertising on the site, and the Holy See paid no fee to Google for hosting the site.

¶3. (U) The move recognizes the fact that, as the Pope noted, the Catholic Church cannot be absent from "the areas in which countless young people surf seeking answers and a meaning for their life." Earlier Vatican efforts to connect with the digital generation included the use of SMS messages sent on behalf of Pope Benedict to young believers during Papal trips to Australia and France. There is no word yet on a Papal blackberry. The Holy Father did receive an iPod as a gift from his staff last year (no word from the papal household on whether he uses it to listen to his beloved Mozart, though).

¶4. (U) Nor is Pope Benedict alone. Many individual members of the Catholic hierarchy use the internet to reach new audiences. Cardinal O'Malley in Boston has his own blog ([HYPERLINK "http://www.cardinalseansblog.org/"](http://www.cardinalseansblog.org/)), Cardinals George (Chicago), Rigali (Philadelphia), and Zen (Hong Kong) have all recorded YouTube clips, and Cardinal Sepe in Naples, Italy, is a member of Facebook. He has already reached the maximum allowable number of friends (5000), and recently invited his online friends to an in-person meeting.

¶5. (U) The Vatican's has not, however, embraced these new technologies without reservation. The Pope emphasizes the need for the digital world to be truly open to all, and warns that technology could further isolate those "already economically and socially marginalized." He also states that new media should avoid using words or images that debase or degrade people (such as pornography), and that "virtual connectedness" should not come at the expense of "real social interaction."

¶6. (U) Comment: The Vatican's recent embrace of new means of communication, together with its highly publicized forays into green technologies like solar panels for the papal audience hall, has softened its image as a tradition bound institution. By seizing new ways to communicate on faith with the broader world, the Vatican will be able to reach out to larger communities of Catholics - even though Catholicism is growing most quickly in nations with less digital connectivity. The message the Church is conveying to these faithful, however, will remain traditional and occasionally controversial (for example, the Holy See's decision to reinstate a highly traditionalist Catholic group reported on septel). End comment.

